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The Image of Mary:

A Catholic Response

Recent biblical scholarship has raised the question of the gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The Jesus of history is a technical expression for Jesus of Nazareth as He was known and experienced by His contemporaries; the Christ of faith refers to the Christ of the New Testament recognized and proclaimed in faith by the early Christian communities as Lord, Messiah and Son of God. The Gospels themselves were not intended to be historical biographies; they were written to proclaim the faith of the early Christians in the risen Jesus and represent the end product of years of preaching, reflection and interpretation. Still, in spite of the difficulties involved, biblical scholars have been able to move from the Christ of faith back through the levels of the Gospel tradition to the Jesus of history, using the tools of the historical critical method.

In more recent years, similar questions have been raised about recovering the "Mary of history." Specifically, biblical scholars have asked, how many of the New Testament stories about Mary are to be considered as actual, historical accounts? In 1967, the Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg published "Mary, Redemption and Unity," an article in which he contended that the New Testament does not give much historical information about Mary. He argued that in the New Testament, Mary appears consistently as a symbolic character, and that therefore symbolism, not history, is the key to Mariology. The Catholic scholar, Raymond Brown, S.S., has examined Pannenberg's argument and found himself in agreement with it. And a collaborative assessment by Catholic and Protestant scholars, *Mary in the New Testament*, sponsored by the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in the United States, has resulted in very similar conclusions. Briefly Father Brown and the other

scholars involved in the Lutheran-Catholic study on Mary offer the following arguments.

The New Testament does not provide a great deal of information about Mary. The earliest New Testament writings, the letters of Paul, mention only that God sent his Son, "born of a woman, born under the law." Many scholars judge the portrayal of Mary in Mark, the earliest Gospel, as a negative one. Mark is ambiguous as to whether or not Mary is to be included among the members of Jesus' family ("His own") who consider him to be "out of His mind." When Jesus is told "your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you," in Mark's Gospel He asks rhetorically, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" and then makes it clear that the family of believers takes priority over natural family relationships: "And gazing around Him at those seated in the circle He continued, 'These are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me.'" Because of this, and because Jesus in Mark's Gospel complains that a prophet is not "without honor except in his native place, among his own kindred (dropped by Matthew and Luke) and in his own house" (dropped by Luke), the Protestant and Catholic scholars who collaborated on *Mary in the New Testament* conclude that Mark's Gospel contains a "negative portrait" of Mary, while Matthew represents a middle position and Luke a positive one which includes Mary within the eschatological family of Jesus' disciples who hear the Word of God and do it.

The virginal conception of Jesus is mentioned only in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. The majority of scholars consider that many of the details of the infancy narratives represent not so much the reports of eyewitnesses as they do

theological constructions based on Old Testament models and used to illustrate particular theological points. To support their view they point out, first, that none of the information peculiar to the infancy narratives (such as Luke's report that John the Baptist was of priestly descent and related to Jesus) can be clearly verified elsewhere in the New Testament and, second, that the two infancy narratives show so little agreement with each other.

The Fourth Gospel does not add much. Brown points out that John never refers to Mary by name (though he some 15 times refers by name to the other Marys). Instead, in the two scenes where Mary appears, he refers to her by the title "the mother of Jesus." Brown suggests that the story of the miracle at Cana (like Luke's story of the 12-year-old Jesus talking with the teachers in the Temple) may have been based on a popular story representing first-century Christian speculation on the "hidden life" of Jesus, reworked by John ("Woman, how does this concern of yours involve me? My hour has not yet come") to stress again that doing God's will had priority over any family relationship, the same message one finds in the passages in Mark and Luke dealing with Jesus' family.

In a similar way, Brown interprets the Johannine picture of "the mother of Jesus" with "the beloved disciple" at the crucifixion (the synoptics do not tell us that either was among the women there) as a symbolic reinterpretation of family relationships in terms of discipleship, for both become members of a new family at the foot of the cross. So again, John's Gospel seems to offer theological reflection more than historical memory.

Has then modern biblical scholarship

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rendered Roman Catholic Mariological doctrines less tenable by pointing out how little historical knowledge of Mary comes from the New Testament? By no means. Most Roman Catholics are quite aware that the Marian doctrines of their church are not founded simply on Scripture; they have developed out of the church's tradition. And thus the theology of Mary plays a significant ecumenical role in raising the question of the role of tradition as a genuine source of religious knowledge.

The meaning of tradition needs to be explored. Tradition is not primarily a collection of propositions, customs and practices, an objectified body of "truths" handed on from generation to generation. Tradition is primarily the living faith experience of the Christian community. It is the faith as experienced and lived. For Karl Rahner, tradition means the apostolic church itself handing on for all ages what it has heard from eye-witnesses and experienced of the Lord Jesus present in the community of believers. The tradition of the church comes to expression in various ways, in those written works recognized by that living faith community as "sacred Scripture," in the worship and sacramental signs of the community and in the formal definitions and creeds formulated by the community's teaching authority. But that living faith experience of the community is always prior to any of the various forms through which it may come to formal expression.

What is true for doctrine in general is true for Mariology in particular. Official Roman Catholic dogmatic teaching includes only four solemn definitions concerning Mary: perpetual virginity, the title Mother of God, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. But these Marian definitions are the dogmatic expression of a long history of Roman Catholic devotion to Mary which emerges out of the faith experience of the early Christian community.

The history of the growth of this devotion is a complex one in which Christian imagination and piety, heterodox tendencies and doctrinal developments have all played a part. As Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., has pointed out, explicit Marian devotion presupposes some dogmatic development, and yet that development was itself facilitated by "the more confused appreciation of Mary prevalent during the early Christian period." The fact that Mary appears so frequently in the apocryphal writings of the second and third century shows that she held a fascination for the imagination of many early Christians. These writings often include examples of pious speculation, attempts to fill in, as it were, details about the life of Mary not provided by the Gospels. Many elements of the church's Marian tradition first appear in these apocryphal writings.

The Ascension of Isaiah, a Christian revision of a Jewish apocalyptic writing, probably dating from the early second century, suggests that the birth of Jesus came about miraculously. Some see this as the first statement of the belief in Mary's virginity in partu. *The Odes of Solomon*, another second-century work with gnostic tendencies, describes Mary as a powerful "mother with many mercies" who brought forth Jesus without any pain. The *Proto-evangelium* or *Gospel of James*, from the middle of the second century, is the source for much of the traditional biographical material relating to Mary; it names for the first time Joachim and Anna as the parents of Mary and tells, often with fantastic details, the story of her birth, her presentation in the Temple and her betrothal to Joseph. The work seems to be the first to assert the perpetual virginity of Mary and explains the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels as the children of Joseph by a previous marriage. A later apocryphal work known as the *Transitus* or "passing" is the literary source for the story of Mary's death and Assumption into heaven. Probably originating towards the end of the fifth century, the *Transitus* cir-

culated widely in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic and Arabic versions. It played a major role in the development of the feast of the Assumption of Mary, already celebrated by some churches in the East by the end of the sixth century.

The apocryphal writings were not recognized by the church as official, "canonical" expressions of the tradition. Many of them were the products of heretical groups and schismatic movements. Yet there is also the chance that they may sometimes express what was already part of a popular piety that would later obtain official recognition.

In contrast to the apocryphal writings, what the early theologians have to say about Mary is much more sober. Much of their teaching is Christological in focus. At the beginning of the second century Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110) emphasized that Mary truly carried Jesus in her womb and truly gave Him birth, to counter the docetist teaching that Christ only "seemed" to have a real human body. Strangely enough, though it is not really consistent with his antidocetist polemic, he also refers to the virginity of Mary. Justin Martyr (d. 165) and especially Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202) developed the parallelism between the virgin Eve and the virgin Mary, a corollary to Paul's symbolism of Christ as the new Adam. Irenaeus, stressing Mary's active role through her obedience in the work of redemption, associated her with the church, a theme which was further developed by Tertullian, Hippolytus and especially Augustine. Mary was increasingly coming to be seen as a type of the church.

Perhaps the most important Mariological development in the early church was the gradual acceptance of the term "theotokos" (Mother of God, literally, God-bearer) as a title for Mary. Theotokos also expressed Christological concerns. It was used as early as 324 by Alexander of Alexandria in a letter against the Arians, and until the definitions of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451 determined its universal acceptance, the title was an important issue in the fierce Christological controversies that troubled the church of the fourth and fifth centuries. But here again, theology was giving expression to what was already part of the faith experience and popular piety of the Christian community. Jaroslav Pelikan has stated that the sources for calling Mary theotokos

"are almost certainly to be sought neither in polemics nor in speculation, but in devotion, perhaps in an early Greek version of the hymn to Mary, 'Sub tuum praesidium.'" Some scholars trace this prayer to the third century; the more general opinion ascribes our present version of it to the fourth. The Greek manuscript fragment asks the "mother of God" for protection, "to deliver us from danger." The prayer is early evidence of Christians turning to Mary as an intercessor. Another form of this prayer appears in the opening petition of the medieval Memorare: "Remember, o most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection. . . ."

Thus the theology of Mary emerges out of the interplay of imagination and controversy, faith experience and theological reflection. Imagination led to contemplation, contemplation to veneration and to prayer. And as Christian people turned to Mary in prayer, they found her to be a powerful intercessor. Devotion to Mary is deeply rooted in the church because of a popular piety founded on the experience of generations of Christian peoples.

Mariology is therefore not only a question of theology. It is very much and even primarily a question of spirituality. This was recognized by the American Lutheran scholar, the Rev. Toivo Harjunpaa, in an article on Mariology from a Lutheran perspective published in *AMERICA* (10/21/67). Harjunpaa argued that the old principle, "lex orandi, lex credendi" (the law of praying is the law of believing) "is particularly true about Mariology through its history—at least as far back as the Council of Ephesus in 431."

In his article Harjunpaa cites the works of some Protestant and Anglican scholars which showed the remarkable degree to which the early Reformers shared the Marian piety of the ancient church. A few examples based on their research may come as a surprise to both Protestants and Catholics. Luther himself had a great devotion to Mary. He wrote more about her than any other Reformer, continued to defend her perpetual virginity and always kept on the wall of his study a crucifix and an image of the virgin. In Zurich, the iconoclastic Zwingli retained the "Hail Mary" in his instructions for public worship. And in a few Lutheran Church orders, the feasts of the Immaculate Conception and the Assump-

tion, already known by the eighth century, survived well into the later part of the 16th century, even though they had no scriptural basis.

Unfortunately, during the Middle Ages, the identification of Mary as a type of the church, which had been so fruitful in the theology of the early church, had given way to an increasingly popular cult of the person of Mary and to an emphasis on her active role in the work of redemption. The result was a tendency to place Mary above the church, gradually obscuring her place within it. Protestantism was not slow in reacting to this, but rather than restoring the

proper balance, in the Reformation traditions the place of Mary in the devotional and theological life of the church all but disappeared. In his *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth goes so far as to assert that "where Mary is 'venerated,' . . . there the Church of Christ is not." Of course, not all Protestants would agree with Barth here.

The balance within Catholicism was restored by Vatican II. One of the more interesting sidelights of the council was the struggle over the schema on Mary that took place both on the floor and behind the scenes. The more conservative council fathers, including the original members of

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the theological commission, wanted the council to issue a separate document on Mary, declaring her to be "Mother of the Church" and "Mediatix of all graces." This might have done irreparable damage ecumenically. The problem was avoided when a slim majority of the council fathers voted to have the council's teaching on Mary included as the final chapter of the Constitution on the Church. While the chapter on Mary touches briefly on her relation to the mystery of Christ, its main focus is on the ecclesial aspect of Mariology, returning specifically to the theme of Mary as an archetype of the church.

It is true that Marian piety has been colored by the social, cultural and political currents of every age. Raymond Brown has sketched the "symbolic trajectory" of Mary's image as it was adapted historically to concretize the ideal of Christian discipleship in different times and places. Mary has taken on the characteristics of an Egyptian nun for the ascetics of the desert in the early church; in the chivalrous culture of the Middle Ages she became "Our Lady" to the knights, a symbol of chaste love; in the 20th century Mary has been honored as part of the Holy Family, a model of family life; most recently, she has been portrayed as an example of the liberated woman in a letter of the American bishops. This is normal, for the Gospel itself must be retranslated for each new age.

But popular piety can also have a darker side if it becomes the vehicle for the anxieties and ideological concerns of a particular period. The strident anti-Communism associated with the devotion to Our Lady of Fatima, at least as this devotion is popularized by some members of the "Blue Army," may be a case in point.

Even though the Roman Catholic Church is careful to distinguish between such popular and yet essentially private devotions and its public professions of faith, as in the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, many Protestants remain suspicious that official Roman Catholic Mariology represents an uncritical canonization of popular devotions and nonbiblical traditions that cannot be reconciled with Scripture. Therefore, Protestants continue to have some serious reservations.

At the same time, we have seen that even though Roman Catholics are aware that the theology of Mary cannot be decided on the basis of "Scripture alone" and is not at the top of what Vatican II called "the hierarchy of truths," still they recognize the importance of both the theology of Mary itself and the issues that are raised by it.

In a time when Lutherans and Catholics have done so much to bridge the historic divisions between their two communions, it is important not to fall back over the theology of Mary into the old polemics of "Scripture alone" versus "Scripture and tradition." Therefore each side needs to ask some serious questions of the other.

In respect to the theology of Mary, Roman Catholics would like to ask Lutherans the following questions:

1. Modern biblical scholarship has helped both Catholics and Lutherans to recognize that Scripture itself is based on tradition, the preaching and life of the early Christian community, which was in turn canonized by the community when it recognized certain written expressions of that tradition, i.e., the books of the New Testament, as divinely inspired books. Lutherans today acknowledge the tradition on which the New Testament is based as the living faith of the early church. Yet they seem reluctant to accept a particular tradi-

tion which also emerges from that living faith experience of the Christian community, that is, the veneration of Mary. Isn't there an inconsistency here?

2. Are Lutherans today willing to accept as part of Christian faith the teaching of the early tradition, the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon and of Luther himself, that Mary is recognized as "Mother of God?"

3. Recognizing that not all Christians need to be bound by doctrinal developments within the Roman Catholic understanding of Mary, Avery Dulles, S.J., has suggested that the Roman Catholic Church remove the anathemas associated with the definitions of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950) as a gesture of ecumenical good will. This is a good suggestion. But Roman Catholics will also want to know if Lutherans are willing to recognize these Mariological dogmas as legitimate examples of this Roman Catholic doctrinal development, not to be considered as heretical or as contrary to the Gospel, even if Lutherans themselves are not bound by them?

4. Do Lutherans emphasize "justification by faith alone" to such an extent that they leave no room theoretically or pastorally for the experimental spirituality or devotional life out of which Marian devotion has grown?

5. Are Lutherans willing to recognize that the Roman Catholic practice of venerating Mary and asking her intercession is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition and not something that should be disparaged as superstitious or as contrary to the Gospel?

Christians today are becoming more tolerant of a considerable pluralism in theological expression and devotional practice within their respective churches. And increasingly they are coming to recognize the need for this kind of tolerance of diversity between churches as well. Unity in faith does not mean uniformity in theology and spirituality. Roman Catholics do not seek to impose Catholic veneration of Mary on Protestants. But neither should Protestants see Catholic veneration of Mary as an obstacle to Christian unity. This is a question of piety, not an issue that should divide the church.

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